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How to Administer Covert Operations

By Edward N. Luttwak

WASHINGTON — If nothing else, recent events — particularly the air intrusion into Nicaragua that left Eugene Hasenfus a prisoner, and the still obscure Iran arms deal — show by implication that the “rogue elephant” C.I.A. of the 1960’s is now well and truly tamed. The White House has declared that C.I.A. operatives were involved in the Iranian mission, but it was current or retired employees of the National Security Council who were reportedly in charge of both operations.

What we have now learned is that there is something even worse than a “rogue elephant” Central Intelligence Agency — and that is the present situation, in which the delicate business of conducting secret operations is left to White House officials and the volunteer helpers they enlist.

The resulting lack of professional expertise was evident in the Nicaraguan case. If the C.I.A. had been involved, the C-123 aircraft that crashed north of Managua would not have been carrying compromising documents: a careful search for any identifying papers and labels is a routine part of pre-flight preparations for clandestine C.I.A. missions. In the Iranian case, the problem was not so much amateurism as a failure to coordinate the venture with key allied governments; the C.I.A. would have done that, while preserving secrecy, by relying on its contacts with officials in foreign governments. As it was, the handful of overburdened individuals who conducted the Iranian operation lacked both the required contacts and the ability to minimize the damage when word got out — as it always will sooner or later.

Past experience shows that secrecy can be combined with coordination with our allies. The French kept a se-

cret of Henry A. Kissinger’s talks with Vietnamese envoys in Paris; Pakistan helped to mediate his talks with the Chinese; the British have kept secrets many times, and so have the Israelis and the Saudis. But individuals operating on their own from an office in the White House basement will inevitably find it difficult to manage a delicate initiative like the Iranian mission and at the same time to maintain liaison with allied capitals. The result is certain to be a severe loss of confidence when the inevitable disclosure follows.

Why then was the C.I.A. not in charge of the Iranian affair? Because as matters now stand the C.I.A. simply cannot carry out genuinely secret operations — as opposed to pseudo-secret “covert” actions, such as the supply of arms to the Afghans, which was a matter of public knowledge almost from the start.

The problem is twofold: the C.I.A. will not now act without permission from Congressional intelligence committees, and Congress has failed to develop practicable oversight procedures and safeguards. The result is paralysis. No official of the C.I.A. in his senses would knowingly participate in a secret operation unless duly authorized by Congress, lest he find himself answering charges and possibly going to jail as a result of future investigations. On the other hand, no professional would risk taking part in a supposedly secret operation overseas if the details had been communicated — as they must be — to Congressional committees. There are simply too many people involved, with too many reasons of their own for leaking to the press.

It was this paralysis that the President’s volunteers tried to overcome in the Iranian and Nicaraguan cases, no doubt out of a sense of responsibility as well as sheer frustration.

So long as the United States remains engaged all over the world, each Administration will face the need to act secretly in delicate matters large and small, often entirely uncontroversial. If we are to do so at all competently, Congress must provide proper oversight. The most effective arrangement would include a single joint committee, with a small, stable staff, operating under strict rules (along the lines of the Joint Atomic Energy Commission, which kept the most sensitive secrets quite intact for decades). Policy would still be disputed, of course, and restrictions would no doubt continue to be imposed, but at least the C.I.A. could resume its proper function — and we would be spared the embarrassments and real diplomatic damage caused by unprofessional and uncoordinated secret operations. □

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